

CHAPTER VIII

MR. QUEST'S WIFE

Mr. Quest lived in one of those ugly but comfortably-built old red brick houses which abound in almost every country town, and which give us the clearest possible idea of the want of taste and love of material comfort that characterised the age in which they were built. This house looked out on to the market place, and had a charming old walled garden at the back, famous for its nectarines, which, together with the lawn tennis court, was, as Mrs. Quest would say, almost enough to console her for living in a town. The front door, however, was only separated by a little flight of steps from the pavement upon which the house abutted.

Entering a large, cool-looking hall, Mr. Quest paused and asked a servant who was passing there where her mistress was.

"In the drawing-room, sir," said the girl; and, followed by Edward Cossey, he walked down a long panelled passage till he reached a door on the left. This he opened quickly and passed through into a charming, modern-looking room, handsomely and even luxuriously furnished, and lighted by French windows opening on to the walled garden.

A little lady dressed in some black material was standing at one of

these windows, her arms crossed behind her back, and absently gazing out of it. At the sound of the opening door she turned swiftly, her whole delicate and lovely face lighting up like a flower in a ray of sunshine, the lips slightly parted, and a deep and happy light shining in her violet eyes. Then, all in an instant, it was instructive to observe /how/ instantaneously, her glance fell upon her husband (for the lady was Mrs. Quest) and her entire expression changed to one of cold aversion, the light fading out of her face as it does from a November sky, and leaving it cold and hard.

Mr. Quest, who was a man who saw everything, saw this also, and smiled bitterly.

"Don't be alarmed, Belle," he said in a low voice; "I have brought Mr. Cossey with me."

She flushed up to the eyes, a great wave of colour, and her breast heaved; but before she could answer, Edward Cossey, who had stopped behind to wipe some mud off his shoes, entered the room, and politely offered his hand to Mrs. Quest, who took it coldly enough.

"You are an early visitor, Mr. Cossey," she said.

"Yes," said her husband, "but the fault is mine. I have brought Mr. Cossey over to ask if you can give him a lift up to the Castle this afternoon. I have to go there to lunch, and have borrowed his

dogcart."

"Oh yes, with pleasure. But why can't the dogcart come back for Mr. Cossey?"

"Well, you see," put in Edward, "there is a little difficulty; my groom is ill. But there is really no reason why you should be bothered. I have no doubt that a man can be found to bring it back."

"Oh no," she said, with a shrug, "it will be all right; only you had better lunch here, that's all, because I want to start early, and go to an old woman's at the other end of Honham about some fuchsia cuttings."

"I shall be very happy," said he.

"Very well then, that is settled," said Mr. Quest, "and now I must get my plans and be off to the vestry meeting. I'm late as it is. With your permission, Mr. Cossey, I will order the dogcart as I pass your rooms."

"Certainly," said Edward, and in another moment the lawyer was gone.

Mrs. Quest watched the door close and then sat down in a low armchair, and resting her head upon the back, looked up with a steady, enquiring gaze, full into Edward Cossey's face.

And he too looked at her and thought what a beautiful woman she was, in her own way. She was very small, rounded in her figure almost to stoutness, and possessed the tiniest and most beautiful hands and feet. But her greatest charm lay in the face, which was almost infantile in its shape, and delicate as a moss rose. She was exquisitely fair in colouring--indeed, the darkest things about her were her violet eyes, which in some lights looked almost black by contrast with her white forehead and waving auburn hair.

Presently she spoke.

"Has my husband gone?" she said.

"I suppose so. Why do you ask?"

"Because from what I know of his habits I should think it very likely that he is listening behind the door," and she laughed faintly.

"You seem to have a good opinion of him."

"I have exactly the opinion of him which he deserves," she said bitterly; "and my opinion of him is that he is one of the wickedest men in England."

"If he is behind the door he will enjoy that," said Edward Cossey.

"Well, if he is all this, why did you marry him?"

"Why did I marry him?" she answered with passion, "because I was forced into it, bullied into it, starved into it. What would you do if you were a defenceless, motherless girl of eighteen, with a drunken father who beat you--yes, beat you with a stick--apologised in the most gentlemanlike way next morning and then went and got drunk again? And what would you do if that father were in the hands of a man like my husband, body and soul in his hands, and if between them pressure was brought to bear, and brought to bear, until at last--there, what is the good of going on it with--you can guess the rest."

"Well, and what did he marry you for--your pretty face?"

"I don't know; he said so; it may have had something to do with it. I think it was my ten thousand pounds, for once I had a whole ten thousand pounds of my own, my poor mother left it me, and it was tied up so that my father could not touch it. Well, of course, when I married, my husband would not have any settlements, and so he took it, every farthing."

"And what did he do with it?"

"Spent it upon some other woman in London--most of it. I found him out; he gave her thousands of pounds at once."

"Well, I should not have thought that he was so generous," he said with a laugh.

She paused a moment and covered her face with her hand, and then went on: "If you only knew, Edward, if you had the faintest idea what my life was till a year and a half ago, when I first saw you, you would pity me and understand why I am bad, and passionate, and jealous, and everything that I ought not to be. I never had any happiness as a girl --how could I in such a home as ours?--and then almost before I was a woman I was handed over to that man. Oh, how I hated him, and what I endured!"

"Yes, it can't have been very pleasant."

"Pleasant--but there, we have done with each other now--we don't even speak much except in public, that's my price for holding my tongue about the lady in London and one or two other little things--so what is the use of talking of it? It was a horrible nightmare, but it has gone. And then," she went on, fixing her beautiful eyes upon his face, "then I saw you, Edward, and for the first time in my life I learnt what love was, and I think that no woman ever loved like that before. Other women have had something to care for in their lives, I never had anything till I saw you. It may be wicked, but it's true."

He turned slightly away and said nothing.

"And yet, dear," she went on in a low voice, "I think it has been one of the hardest things of all--my love for you. For, Edward," and she rose and took his hand and looked into his face with her soft full eyes full of tears, "I should have liked to be a blessing to you, and not a curse, and--and--a cause of sin. Oh, Edward, I should have made you such a good wife, no man could have had a better, and I would have helped you too, for I am not such a fool as I seem, and now I shall do nothing but bring trouble upon you; I know I shall. And it was my fault too, at least most of it; don't ever think that I deceive myself, for I don't; I led you on, I know I did, I meant to--there! Think me as shameless as you like, I meant to from the first. And no good can come of it, I know that, although I would not have it undone. No good can ever come of what is wrong. I may be very wicked, but I know that----" and she began to cry outright.

This was too much for Edward Cossey, who, as any man must, had been much touched by this unexpected outburst. "Look here, Belle," he blurted out on the impulse of the moment, "I am sick and tired of all this sort of thing. For more than a year my life has been nothing but a living lie, and I can't stand it, and that's a fact. I tell you what it is: I think we had better just take the train to Paris and go off at once, or else give it all up. It is impossible to go on living in this atmosphere of continual falsehood."

She stopped crying. "Do you really care for me enough for that, Edward?" she said.

"Yes, yes," he said, somewhat impatiently, "you can see I do or I should not make the offer. Say the word and I'll do it."

She thought for a moment, and then looked up again. "No," she said, "no, Edward."

"Why?" he asked. "Are you afraid?"

"Afraid!" she answered with a gesture of contempt, "what have I to be afraid of? Do you suppose such women as I am have any care for consequences? We have got beyond that--that is, for ourselves. But we can still feel a little for others. It would ruin you to do such a thing, socially and in every other way. You know you have often said that your father would cut you out of his will if you compromised yourself and him like that."

"Oh, yes, he would. I am sure of it. He would never forgive the scandal; he has a hatred of that sort of thing. But I could get a few thousands ready money, and we could change our names and go off to a colony or something."

"It is very good of you to say so," she said humbly. "I don't deserve it, and I will not take advantage of you. You will be sorry that you made the offer by to-morrow. Ah, yes, I know it is only because I cried. No, we must go on as we are until the end comes, and then you

can discard me; for all the blame will follow me, and I shall deserve it, too. I am older than you, you know, and a woman; and my husband will make some money out of you, and then it will all be forgotten, and I shall have had my day and go my own way to oblivion, like thousands of other unfortunate women before me, and it will be all the same a hundred years hence, don't you see? But, Edward, remember one thing. Don't play me any tricks, for I am not of the sort to bear it. Have patience and wait for the end; these things cannot last very long, and I shall never be a burden on you. Don't desert me or make me jealous, for I cannot bear it, I cannot, indeed, and I do not know what I might do--make a scandal or kill myself or you, I'm sure I can't say what. You nearly sent me wild the other day when you were carrying on with Miss de la Molle--ah, yes, I saw it all--I have suspected you for a long time, and sometimes I think that you are really in love with her. And now, sir, I tell you what it is, we have had enough of this melancholy talk to last me for a month. Why did you come here at all this morning, just when I wanted to get you out of my head for an hour or two and think about my garden? I suppose it was a trick of Mr. Quest's bringing you here. He has got some fresh scheme on, I am sure of it from his face. Well, it can't be helped, and, since you are here, Mr. Edward Cossey, tell me how you like my new dress," and she posed herself and courtesied before him. "Black, you see, to match my sins and show off my complexion. Doesn't it fit well?"

"Charmingly," he said, laughing in spite of himself, for he felt in no

laughing mood, "and now I tell you what it is, Belle, I am not going to stop here all the morning, and lunch, and that sort of thing. It does not look well, to say the least of it. The probability is that half the old women in Boisingham have got their eyes fixed on the hall door to see how long I stay. I shall go down to the office and come back at half-past two."

"A very nice excuse to get rid of me," she said, "but I daresay you are right, and I want to see about the garden. There, good-bye, and mind you are not late, for I want to have a nice drive round to the Castle. Not that there is much need to warn you to be in time when you are going to see Miss de la Molle, is there? Good-bye, good-bye."